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*Aurora Online with*

Neil

**BISSOONDATH**



### Up-and-Coming

Interview by Aja Norgaard

**He** works as carefully as he can. What happens after that is up to the publisher and the public. It's all a writer can do.

Neil Bissoonodath came to Canada as a young Trinidadian student in 1973 and has never looked back. He studied French at York University, completing his B.A. in 1977. For several years he taught French and English as a second language in Toronto before becoming a full-time writer.

Bissoondath exploded onto the Canadian literary scene in 1985 with the release of his first book, a collection of short stories under the title, *Digging Up the Mountains*. While some had labelled Bissoondath's success a fairy-tale story come true, time has shown that his career as a writer is based on more than mere luck. Three years later, his first full-length novel, *A Casual Brutality*, met with the same high acclaim and firmly established him as a writer to be reckoned with now and in the future.

The short stories of *Digging Up the Mountains* are concerned with the alienation and helplessness felt by those who have lost control of their lives because of political and cultural changes. With sensitivity and precision, Bissoondath captures the emotional turmoil of men and women forced to submit to the oppression and, often, violence of their society, whether caused by tyranny, poverty, or prejudice. He offers no judgments, no solutions, and the result is a realism which is profoundly depressing.

*A Casual Brutality* presents the reader with a similar picture. The main character, Raj Ramsingh, leaves the narrow confines of his West Indian home to study medicine in Toronto only to return after several years with his Canadian wife and his son. His dream of helping his struggling homeland becomes a nightmare of racial terror and violence, and the defeat of an idealism that could not survive in an environment of hatred, fear, and poverty.

In his first two books, Bissoondath echoes the concerns and beliefs of his uncle, V. S. Naipaul, whose twenty books have won him international renown. Bissoondath, however, writes with the sharpness and lack of sentimentality of a younger generation born in a world where tradition and the family no longer provide the guidelines for living or the means for survival.

The man behind the printed words is much happier and more enthusiastic than the characters he has created. Talking from his home in Montreal, Neil Bissoondath made it clear that he is very much in control of his own life, confident, happy, and looking forward to the future.

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**Aurora:** In your writing you describe the traumatic experience of the immigrant on arrival in Canada. What was your first impression of Canada when you arrived here in 1973?

**Bissoondath:** Well, I actually liked what I saw. I didn't know much before coming here. I could have gone to England or to the U.S., but I was advised that Canada was probably the best place to go to since England was collapsing socially and economically, and the U.S. just seemed too big. When I arrived in Toronto, I had one friend there, and I knew nothing of the place. But I loved what I saw. I didn't go through any trauma myself.

**Aurora:** You studied French at York University. What made you choose French as a major?

**Bissoondath:** I have always loved reading and good writing, but studying English literature in high school was a distressing experience. In Trinidad we weren't reading any West Indian writers; we were reading British writers. We had to say how marvelous they were and quote British critics in our essays. The teaching approach was one of autopsy—you read a book, and then you dissected it. I found that at the end of that, the simple enjoyment of reading had disappeared.

I haven't been able to read Henry James or Jane Austen or any of these people since high school simply because the pleasures of reading them were destroyed. I purposely decided that I was going to avoid that at university and so, perversely, studied French instead.

**Aurora:** You have settled down in Canada very well, and you are successful and happy here. Why do many of your characters experience such a deep sense of alienation and bitterness, even despair, when they are forced by circumstances to move to Canada?

**Bissoondath:** A lot of people, though not all, do go through that. I am one of the lucky ones who did not have that distress, but a lot of people do, and I find them fascinating. They seem so caught up in their past that they never have the time to look around properly at their new society. This leads to bitterness, to a sense of betrayal, all of which comes more often than not from not being able to let go of the past. I find that fascinating, which is why I have written about it so much.

**Aurora:** Would your solution be that people should try to mingle or amalgamate themselves into society rather than live together in their own ethnic groups?

**Bissoondath:** I'm not saying that you should forget where you've come from or who you are. But you should be careful that your own personality is not frozen by the little group into which you've inserted yourself because it's so comfortable.

Part of immigration is uncomfortable, and I suppose it is only human to flee from that. But dealing with the discomfort can help you to achieve what you dreamt of achieving when you first immigrated. This new society holds the promises that you came for in the first place.

**Aurora:** You have refused to be stereotyped as a Trinidadian writer— you have called yourself a Canadian writer. What does that label, Canadian, mean in terms of literature?

**Bissoondath:** I like the term Canadian writer because it means so much. It includes so many people. It includes W. O. Mitchell. It includes Morley Callaghan, and people like Michael Ondaatje

and myself. It's wide open. I think because of that, I'm comfortable with it. It doesn't pigeonhole you anymore as it once did.

I think once being called a Canadian writer meant that you wrote about growing up on the prairies, but Canadian writing now has moved well beyond that into all kinds of spheres. Because of that variety I accept the label.

**Aurora:** For you, being a Canadian writer would actually be the same as calling yourself a global writer.

**Bissoondath:** Precisely. Very nicely put. Yes.

**Aurora:** Inevitably your writing is compared to that of your uncle, V. S. Naipaul. What do you see as the major differences between your writing and his?

**Bissoondath:** Well first of all, let me say that the comparison, while it has been done in a few cases, hasn't happened as much as I feared it would. I've been lucky in not having the same last name. And those people who have compared us have compared not so much our writing as our politics. We tend to be lumped together and then spat upon, which is fine with me.

We're very different writers. We are from very different generations. We have different attitudes in many ways, but we agree on certain political aspects of what we write about. But I really don't think about it that much because I don't compare myself with any other writer. I've always viewed myself as simply me, one writer, and I think every writer is so individual that I don't see any point in comparing us, our writing especially.

**Aurora:** But often the easiest way to handle a book is to say what it compares to or what it's like.

**Bissoondath:** I know. One review began by saying that Neil Bissoondath is not the writer that his Uncle V. S. Naipaul is. Well, I was pleased to see that because Neil Bissoondath is the writer that Neil Bissoondath is. But this person went on to say that my writing was not as good as my uncle's. Well, that is for that person to decide. I think we write in such very different ways that it's silly to compare us, but this person also forgot that my uncle has been writing for thirty years and has written about twenty books. I've written two.

**Aurora:** Your first book, *Digging Up the Mountains*, is a collection of short stories. Why did you choose short stories for your first publication?

**Bissoondath:** I didn't choose short stories so much as this is what came out. These are simply stories that I enjoyed writing. One day a very good friend, whom I'd been telling for a very longtime that I wrote, insisted that he had to see what I was writing. So I showed him the stories I'd put together. He read them in a night and called me the next day saying that they had to be sent somewhere. I hadn't really thought about it before. But we got together with a bottle of wine, and he wrote this snarky little letter which we put with the manuscript. Then he said, "Where do you want to send it?" I picked Macmillan simply because I liked some of the things that they published.

**Aurora:** In your collections, some of the main characters are women. What changes in viewpoint did you have to make being a male in order to create this narrator who is a very believable female?

**Bissoondath:** Well, thank you. I'm not particularly aware of any changes that I had to make in my own perception. I think it has a lot to do with my instinctive approach to writing fiction. To give you an example, I'll be taking a shower or washing the dishes or vacuuming the rug, and suddenly there will be an image in my mind. It might be a line of dialogue or description. Something inside

me then knows that there is a story waiting to be told. I simply sit down at the typewriter and begin with that image.

Part of writing a story, of course, is finding the correct voice. In a way I heard the voices of these women speaking to me in my head, and I simply wrote down what they told me. It feels at times as unconscious as that. When I find myself beginning to manipulate things or wondering would this character say this or that, I pull back because it means that I'm not following the instincts of the character. You can manipulate things a little too much, and that, more often than not, leads to a tone of falseness in writing.

**Aurora:** You have said that *A Casual Brutality* wrote itself and grew out of images. A lot of these images seemed like short stories in themselves. Did you have a group of short stories and then create the book around them? How did you actually write that book?

**Bissoondath:** That book began in different pieces. Different scenes came to me, and I simply wrote them down. It took about two and a half years to write. The first year or so was spent capturing these images that were coming to me in no particular order. A couple of short stories that had not gone into *Digging Up the Mountains* eventually worked themselves into the book, but it certainly was not a conscious decision. The story jumped back and forth of its own accord, and I followed.

One of the tensions of writing a novel is that you finish developing one image that forms a chapter or half a chapter, and you've got to wait for the next image to present itself. The tension is in wondering if the next image will present itself, and eventually it does.

**Aurora:** Do you get up in the middle of the night and run down and write something because an image comes to you?

**Bissoondath:** Precisely. I get up sometimes in the middle of the night. Or if I've come to the end of a section, and I know instinctively again that it is the end of a section, I go for a little walk. I just walk around the neighbourhood aimlessly, not thinking about anything in particular, and more often than not, an image will come to me. Then I dash back home and jot it down.

It is part, I suppose, of learning how your brain works and learning to trust your imagination to eventually come forth with what you need. But it can come at the strangest of times. It seems to happen often when you're wet, when you're taking a shower or washing dishes. Your place can be really clean when you write.

**Aurora:** Do some images also come from your own experiences?

**Bissoondath:** Yes. The funeral scene in *A Casual Brutality* was based on my own experience of a Hindu funeral. When my mother died in 1985, I went to Trinidad and found that I was expected to perform the funeral ceremony. I was appalled and overwhelmed at times and at other times, felt an incredible relief. The greatest relief, strangely enough, came when I actually lit the funeral pyre and knew that her body was being consumed. I went away from the cremation site feeling almost light and cheerful. It was really strange.

**Aurora:** One reviewer criticized *A Casual Brutality* saying it is a short story of novel length. What do you view as the difference between the novel and the short story?

**Bissoondath:** I think on a purely practical level, it is simply a question of how much space you have to move around in, how many characters you have space to deal with, and whether the story itself is large enough to require a greater length. As far as the criticism, it is a strange comment

because other people have made the opposite comment. Having done reviews myself, I know it is simply an individual's reaction to a piece of work at a given time.

Right now I'm writing a new collection of short stories, and by everything that occurs to me I know they are short stories. They tell themselves to me in anywhere between twenty and forty pages.

**Aurora:**What themes are you going to be attacking in your future writing?

**Bissoondath:** That is difficult to say because I tend to discover themes only after I've written the fiction. I'm still discovering themes in *A Casual Brutality* from talking to readers of the book. When I give readings, for example, I enjoy afterwards having question-and-answer sessions or discussion with the audience because I discover a lot of what's in the book from talking to the audience.

As for the future, there is a lot that I want to write. There are many things that I'm interested in. I have in mind a book about Spain, for which I will be doing a bit of travel research next year. That will be history and travel all mixed together with the techniques of fiction. It's a difficult book to describe. I can't think of a genre that it will fit into, but I'm very excited about it.

**Aurora:**So you are going to be breaking new ground here.

**Bissoondath:** If it works. Usually I find that at the beginning of something, when I think I know what it's going to be, it usually turns out to be not that at all. So, we'll just have to wait and see.

I'll be as much surprised as anyone else.

**Aurora:**You've had two major successes behind you. Is it getting easier or harder to write?

**Bissoondath:** It's getting no different, actually. Someone once said before writing a novel you have to take a deep breath; with short stories you can take a few shorter breaths. I generally write a short story in about six weeks. Then I take a few days off and do some reading, some knocking around. So writing short stories is easier on the nerves in that way, but the writing itself I don't find gets any more difficult or less difficult.

**Aurora:** You are not feeling any pressure because of the success of your first two books?

**Bissoondath:** No. In fact, after *Digging Up the Mountains*, several people wondered if I was feeling pressure for the next book, for *A Casual Brutality*. I thought about it and realized that there was no reason for me to feel any pressure. People's expectations are the worst things that you could indulge in. There is simply no point to it.

You, as a writer, do your work and you do your best. What happens once the book is published, you have very little control over. You have all the control when you are actually doing it, and the thing is to make sure that you are being as careful as you can when doing the work itself. So I don't worry about people's expectations or what the reception of the next book will be. I simply do my work as I always have.

**Aurora:**What advice would you give to budding Canadian writers?

**Bissoondath:** The only advice that I give to any writer is to write. It's advice that I got myself several years ago from my uncle. I asked him in a letter what I should do in order to become a writer. He wrote back, and he said that the first thing you have to do is to educate yourself, and that didn't mean taking courses. It meant being interested in and finding out about the great civilizations

and the not-so-great civilizations. Finding out about different countries, the way people live, architecture, music, literature, and understanding as much as you possibly can. And then, of course, the thing beyond that is simply to write.

I've never taken a creative writing course, and I didn't know what can be taught in them. I've spoken with several creative writing teachers who are not sure either what can be taught in such courses. One creative writing teacher said he taught his students not to use too many adjectives. And for those reasons, I have never taken a course myself. I've simply written.

I know too many people who want to be writers and start living what they think is the lifestyle of a writer, but that leaves very little time for the actual writing. And that is deadly. They want to live as writers, not be writers. So, the only advice that I could ever give is write, and then send your stuff out.

Before I showed the stories to my friend, I did a little bit of investigating. I read two magazines about writing and publishing, one American and one Canadian. The Canadian one said, if you have no reputation of any kind, why send your book to big publishers. They are going to ignore you. Send it to a small one. Send your stories to the little literary magazines. Sure, the payment is only two copies, but at least you begin to get your name known. The American one said just the opposite. It said, you are unknown, nobody knows who you are, so why not try the big companies first and then work your way down. That formed my choice. So, that is the other thing I would say to new writers, is don't underestimate yourself.

## **Books by Neil Bissoondath**

*Digging up Mountains*, New Canadian Library, 1987

*A Casual Brutality*, Cormorant Books, 1989

*On the Eve of Uncertain Tomorrows*, Lester, Orpen and Denny, 1991

*The Innocence of Age*, Penguin Canada, 1993

*Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*, Penguin Books, 1995

*The Worlds Within Her*, Vintage Canada, 1999 (Nominated for a Governor General's Award)

*Doing the Heart Good*, Cormorant Books, 2002

*The Unyielding Clamour of the Night*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005

*The Age of Confession/L'Âge de la confession*, Goose Lane Editions & Université de Moncton; Bilingual edition, 2007

Article originally published Fall 1989

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## **An Aurora Update**

Since writing this article, Mr. Bissoondath has published several novels, his latest being *The Worlds Within Her* (1999). He is host and writer for "Vision World," international documentaries

on development themes for Vision TV. He has also taught at the Humber School for Writers.

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